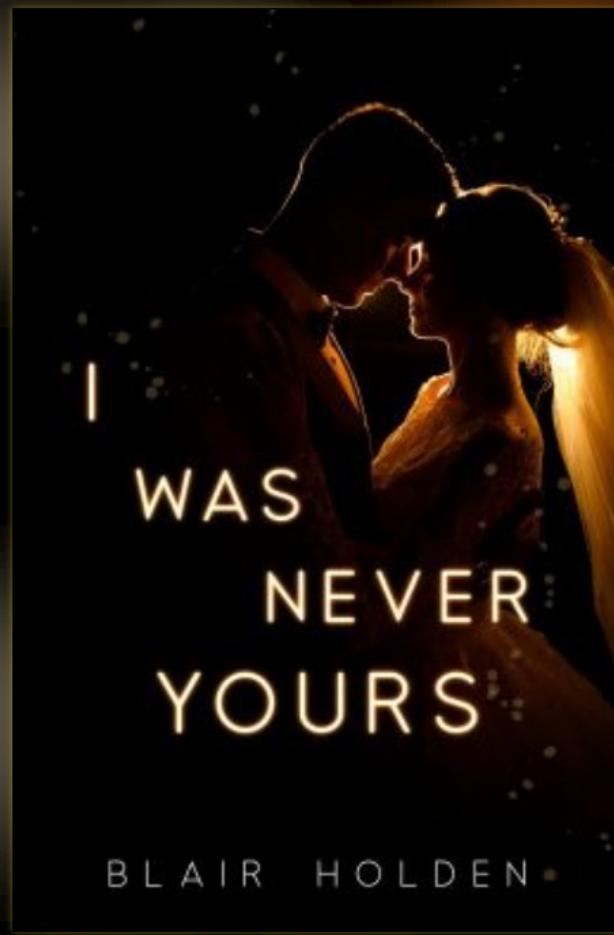


I Was Never Yours

Blair

Complete



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Summary

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Description:

When Arianna marries billionaire Zach Price to save her family, she doesn't expect to fall in love with a man who'd always consider her a second choice. An unexpected turn of events brings the couple closer together, but can a marriage based on lies and deceit ever survive?

When Arianna's older sister, Olivia, decides to run away on the day of her wedding, Arianna is forced to take her place to save her family from ruin. But her new husband is angry, heartbroken, and seems to hate her guts. The cold, elusive billionaire Zach Price has never quite struck Arianna as the kind of man she'd want to spend her entire life with. She was more than content with her sweet, thoughtful boyfriend Noah, but when circumstances force them together, Zach and Arianna's hearts get entangled in a way she never saw coming. As the couple grows closer, they must battle the demons of their past and of the lives they left behind — especially when Olivia returns and decides she wants Zach all for herself.

Content/Trigger Warning: This story contains scenes of violence and sexual abuse, and mentions abortion and miscarriage.

[[word count: 100,000-150,000 words]]

Cover designed by Ren Tachibana

1-Happenstance

I was brushing my hair in the penthouse suite when I first heard the voices. Loud, panicked voices and the sound of people arguing. Not again, I thought to myself, rolling my eyes. People had been fighting all day over the smallest of things. The flowers, the food, the seating arrangements, the decoration, you name it and there was a problem with it. I wasn't surprised though, my mother and sister were perfectionists. I pitied the wedding planner who'd taken up such a Herculean task of satisfying not only Olivia but also my mother.

Olivia's wedding was all anybody could talk about for months, not that I was complaining. I loved weddings; there was just something about the 'till death do us part' line that got me every time. The idea of two people deciding to spend the rest of their lives together was so utterly romantic and everything about a wedding symbolized that decision for me. It had surprised me that my elder sister had agreed to the wedding after dating Zach for only two months but hey, I guess when you find the 'One' there isn't a lot left to think about.

I giggled when I thought about finding the 'One'. Hopefully I'd managed to find my soulmate too. Noah was everything I could ever ask for and more. Sweet, romantic, sensitive and compassionate, he was the ideal boyfriend and I'd fallen for him hook, line and sinker. He would be here today and the idea of seeing him in a tux made butterflies appear in the pit of my stomach. Oh I had it bad.

I got up to examine myself in the full-length mirror placed in my room, ignoring the increasingly loud voices

that had started coming from the hallway. Whatever it was that was wrong now could be handled, just like it had been handled previously. Seriously, they just needed to calm down.

I twirled a strand of my curled long brown hair around my finger and fidgeted with my figure-hugging cream dress. Of course it had been selected by my sister and I wasn't one to argue; it was her wedding after all, I couldn't just go about telling her that the dress she'd picked up for me barely gave me room to breathe. I was naturally curvy and the dress did a good job of hiding that; I looked almost as thin as my sister and that made our resemblance even more prominent. Both of us had deep brown hair and the same green eyes as dark as emeralds, and both of us were cursed with the same pale skin which refused to get a shade darker. Olivia often said people would die to get such a clear, creamy skin tone but how I wished that my hours at the beach paid off.

The dress was fitted at the bust, the sweetheart neckline revealing only an appropriate amount of cleavage. A bow right underneath the bust tightened the grip on my waist and the skirt of the dress skimmed my body, hugging the area around me hips. It was hard being in it but if I do say so myself, it made me feel and look gorgeous. Olivia did inherit our mother's exquisite taste.

I was examining myself in front of the mirror for the millionth time when suddenly an assortment of people walked in, halting me in my tracks. My parents, Olivia's in-laws the Prices and her fiancé Zach, along with my Uncle Collin and Aunt Ophelia all stormed right in without as much as a knock, but the look on their faces made that thought go away immediately. Worry was etched onto their features and my mother looked pale enough to faint at any moment. Oh no, something terrible's happened, I thought

to myself, dread filling my body. It was how defeated and haunted my father looked that told me that the problem was bigger than the usual wedding woes. He was never one to worry about the small things and was generally a very optimistic man; if something had managed to take a toll on him then it had to be bad.

“What is it?” I found myself asking them, my heart racing a mile a minute.

No one answered; they looked like they didn’t have the courage to answer my question. I looked around at all of them, expecting someone to speak up. Mrs. Price placed a hand on her husband’s arm just as he was about to say something. He looked red in the face, like he was barely controlling his fury and I shuddered at the thought of witnessing one of his famous tantrums.

After what seemed like an eternity, it was my Aunt Ophelia who answered, her face contorting into a mask of pain and sorrow. Okay, now I was officially freaking out.

“Honey, we found this in your sister’s room,” she said, holding up a piece of writing paper. I walked towards her, my legs shaking as I did so and grabbed it from her. On it, in my sister’s perfect handwriting, were the words:

I’m sorry but I can’t do this. I can’t go through with this wedding, I don’t love him. Please try to understand that I’m doing this for the both of us. I’m going away and I’m not sure if I ever plan on coming back. Don’t try to find me and please don’t hate me.

A gasp left my lips as I held the note in my trembling hands. This could not be happening, it had to be some kind of a sick joke that everyone was playing on me. My eyes searched their faces for any sign of contradiction but there

was none. Everyone was just as shocked as I was and just as hurt. However, one face confirmed the horrifying fact.

Zach. He looked so broken, so dejected and crushed that I felt my heart ache for him. His shoulders were slumped in defeat, his entire body tensed and stiffened and his fists clenched. That however wasn't the worst part, the worst part was how he was trying to be strong and not give away the amount of pain he felt but I could see it. His eyes told a story of their own and there was nothing false in that story. How could Olivia have done this to him?

"Ari we know that this must be so difficult for you but the fact is that we have a wedding to go to in less than four hours with over three thousand people arriving."

I looked at my aunt like she had lost her mind. What wedding? The bride had run away, she had made a terrible mess and had left us all to deal with the frightening consequences that were surely to follow. There wasn't going to be a wedding anymore, how could there be?

As if reading my mind, my father spoke up, his voice completely lacking the confidence I normally associated with it. "We can't cancel the wedding sweetheart. It'll ruin us, all of us. If a wedding doesn't take place today not only will we be utterly humiliated but we could stand to lose everything," he choked out and I stared at him stupidly not knowing where this was headed.

My mother, someone who would never allow herself to be humbled by anyone, looked at me then, pleading with me with her eyes.

"We need your help Ari. You're the only one who can save this family now."

Approximately four hours later I was taken into the church followed closely by my mother, my aunt and the few

cousins who had been told the truth. A long veil covered my face and the corset I wore under the dress molded my shape to fit into the dress. My sister's wedding dress.

The music began to play and I fixed my gaze firmly to the ground, begging myself to not let any tears escape. My father linked his arm with mine as everyone else left the room.

"Ari, honey you have no idea what this means to us," he whispered in my ear and I nodded my head slightly, not trusting myself to speak.

It was to the beat of the traditional wedding march that I walked towards the altar, my father gripping my arm tightly, comforting me but all the while suffocating me. He let go of me when we reached where Zach and his best man stood and after completing his duty of giving me away, he left me alone to take the biggest step in my life.

The vows were said, the lies concealed as I took Zach Price to be my husband, for better or for worse. My actions were mechanical, my tone robotic. I had always dreamt of the day I would get married but now I knew better. Those dreams hadn't been dreams to begin with; they had been signs of the nightmare to come.

One sentence, I whispered one sentence as the priest pronounced us husband and wife, hoping the words would somehow reach him.

"I love you Noah, please forgive me."

2-Unrest

Fifty times. That was the number of times Noah had called me in the past hour and also the number of times I had hit the red button and cancelled his calls. A part of me was dying as I did this to him but an even larger part was already dead inside of me. A kind of numbness had crept all over me and as a result of that, I felt nothing. Absolutely nothing. The shock had been so great that it had rendered me incapable of behaving the way a normal person would under the circumstances.

I leant my head against the car window, pressing my forehead against the cool glass to provide a reprieve to my burning forehead. I was ill, a temperature of about 102 degrees and it was a miracle that I had still managed to maintain some level of consciousness. I couldn't tell *him*, I couldn't even look at him without wanting to wrench my own heart out. What had happened? How had this day gone from being so perfect to becoming the biggest nightmare of my life?

I, Arianna Bell, was married to Zach Price, the Zach Price who was supposed to marry my sister a few hours ago. The thought made me want to hurl and the one thing I wanted more than anything else was for someone to wake me up. Any moment now, Olivia would come yelling for me in my room, shaking me so that I'd wake up and make her her favourite chocolate chip pancakes.

It didn't happen, she didn't come and no one woke me up. Olivia had abandoned me, left me to the worst of fates and here I was in a car, married to the man who was supposed to be her husband. I couldn't even dare move my

face towards him, in fear of the amount of hate that I might see in his eyes. I had willingly sacrificed my happiness for my family's sake but Zach? Zach had been forced to do so; I had heard the arguments, his parents trying to reason with him. In the end his father had resorted to threatening to disinherit him. I didn't even need to look at him to know how much he resented me.

The car came to a halt outside a huge mansion, the Price Mansion to be exact. I had been here a couple of times with my family but never had the place looked so daunting, so intimidating. It was engulfed in darkness and as I peered out of the car window, I realized that this was the welcome that was specifically intended for me. Had the day gone as planned and Olivia had arrived instead of me, there would have been lights galore, celebration and an air of festivity. I on the other hand brought with me gloom and perpetual doom. The gates opened to let the car in and I could feel the stare of the watchman following my face as the car slowly made its way inside. No sooner had we stopped than Zach sprang from his seat, getting out and slamming the car door behind him.

A migraine made its way to my head that coupled with my burning fever didn't really help my condition. I tried to move but my body felt too weak to even be able to move a single muscle. The driver had noticed my predicament and opened my door with a concerned expression on his face.

"Are you alright Miss?"

I shook my head, a sharp pain shooting through it as I did so. I gripped my temple and laid my head back on the seat. Everything was starting to spin around me, my eyes beginning to water. I distinctly heard the driver call for someone before it all faded to black.

"Will she be fine?" he asked and even in the state of near unconsciousness that I was in, I scoffed. He didn't care, the carefree tone of his voice made that obvious. He'd left me in the car and now was putting on act for God knows who.

"Well I've written down the required medicines and a nurse will arrive shortly to stay with her as you requested. I'm sure that when she wakes up, the temperature will be considerably lower. There's no need to worry, Mr. Price."

A doctor, I assumed and tuned them out. Couldn't he just let me be? I'd prefer to be in this state forever than to wake up and have to face reality. A reality in which I was Zach's wife, a reality in which my sister had left me to be fed to the sharks, a reality in which my parents literally sacrificed me on the altar. Worst of all, a reality in which there was no Noah.

A pain shot through my chest at the thought of his name. Noah, Noah, Noah. Would he ever find out about what happened to me? What would he think? Would he hate me? I loved him so much, could he be able to see that? The questions made my head hurt and I felt the migraine come back with a vengeance. My head felt like it was being crushed with the weight of a thousand boulders and I couldn't hold it in any longer. A low scream left my mouth and immediately I felt someone rush into the room.

Zach hovered above me protectively and I shivered inwardly at the size of him. He towered above me as I lay on the bed, his features masked by the lack of light in the room. I couldn't see the expression on his face; was he angry, annoyed, worried?

"What's wrong Arianna?" he asked softly and knelt beside the bed. He was near enough for me to smell his cologne, an expensive one at that. Noah didn't smell like

that, not like rich people. He had his own wonderfully warm scent. I quickly pushed the thought out of my head.

“My head...” I managed to choke out in between the spasms of pain that were now rocking my entire body.

“Here, take this. The doctor said it’d make the pain go away.”

Zach made me sit upright and noticed how disabled the pain had made me. He made me open my mouth and placed some pills inside it and then placed a glass of water near my mouth, forcing me to drink. The simple act of kindness was all it took for my inner guilt to come back and haunt me.

Voluntarily or not, I had taken a place in Zach’s life that was never meant for me. I had invaded his world without permission and he had to bear the brunt of that. My sister, my own flesh and blood had ruined his life because of her selfishness. He did not deserve what he’d gotten.

After laying me down carefully on the bed Zach walked out of the room, switching off the bedside lamp as he left. The last thought that crossed my mind before the sleeping pills began to take effect was how unusual it was for someone to be so fond of the dark. Not a single light illuminated his way as he walked out so easily into the darkness. Is that how he perceived his life to be now? Full of darkness, was there no room for light in his life anymore?

3-Strength

I woke up with a start, my breathing considerably heavy and my eyes puffy. Had I cried myself to sleep again? Apparently I had. Mostly I tried not to sleep at all; the less I slept the fewer nightmares I had. It would be the same thing time and time again. Walls closing in on me, a window on the other side of which Noah stood, smiling at me. I tried to break the barrier between us but time would always run out, the walls would always close in on me and I'd wake up screaming for release.

I wondered if Zach heard the screaming, if it had any effect on him. Since the day the doctor came to see me Zach and I had not met. I was glad for once that in the huge house, two people could live together without having to see each other. He lived on the first floor and my room was on the upper one. It was convenient for both of us since Zach could come and go as he pleased and I could enjoy the solitude. The only people I ever met were members of the staff, women who'd come to clean and the butler who'd come to serve me food. I hated being waited upon but something in me never allowed me to leave the confines of my room. The house wasn't mine, I didn't belong here. I had no right to walk around the place like I owned it.

I pulled the robe around myself, seeing as how I was shivering in my silk nightgown. My things had been sent from the house and I'd had quite the breakdown the day they arrived. My clothes, shoes, books, old photographs, all of it came to me perfectly packed in boxes. I laughed bitterly to myself as I remembered the fact that they hadn't sent a single thing which could possibly relate to Noah. The

gifts he'd given me, a framed photograph, the occasional teddy bear, some jewellery, none of it was there. My mother must've thought that it was for the better, to not have any reminders of the past in my new life. If only she knew that my new life was more like purgatory, maybe then she'd have taken pity on me and sent me the things which reminded me of the one good memory that I could associate with my old life.

I walked up to the balcony that was attached to my room and took in the fresh morning air. It was around six in the morning and the time by which I was usually awake. Mist drowned everything in it and made my surroundings look cold and dreary, almost lifeless. Every day I woke up to hope that something would change about the place, that something miraculous would happen and I'd finally learn to accept the place as my new home, but it didn't. The Price mansion stood looking as formidable and grim as ever and as something that I'd never accept and nor would it accept me. It was loyal to its owner after all.

The sound of tyres screeching made me jolt and I looked down to see Zach's Ferrari racing inside the gates. Wait, had he been out all night? I gazed at the red vehicle, waiting for its owner to emerge, so imagine my surprise when the first person to come out of the car was wearing high heels.

My heart stopped. My first thought? Maybe Olivia had come back, maybe he'd found her. Maybe just maybe my life could be saved. The person who came out however was blonde and wearing clothes that even my sister would shy away from. Zach came out and walked over to her, wrapping his arms around her waist and kissing her neck. There was a slight clumsiness to his walk, a tell-tale sign of him being drunk. I gulped as the two continued to have an intense make-out session in the foyer. I waited for the pain

to come but it didn't, I felt nothing. He could do whatever he wanted, I didn't care. I tore my eyes away from the two and headed to the bathroom to take a shower.

Two hours later as I was randomly changing the channels on TV, I heard the sound of something shattering from outside. The help wouldn't come till about nine so there was only one person or rather two that could be here and I started panicking, realizing that I didn't want to see either.

The sounds continued to come, loud sounds of things being thrown on the ground, of objects being violently broken and that's when I realized that it was enough. With a determined look on my face I left the safety of my room, only to find the living room in complete and utter apocalyptic condition. Everything had been turned inside out and everything which could potentially be destroyed had been reduced to pieces. Lamps were broken, vases shattered, paintings strewn across the floor and cushions ripped open. In the middle of it all stood Zach, looking absolutely murderous and when his eyes found me, his rage if it was possible increased tenfold.

To be completely honest, I was terrified. He looked so angry, so furious that it automatically sent a chill down my spine. I began to walk away from him, retreating carefully so as to not attract attention but I wasn't careful enough. Zach caught up to me before I could make it back to my room, grabbing my arm and pushing me against the wall. I felt sickened as I smelled the alcohol in his breath, his grey eyes boring into mine. I cowered against his touch, his grip on my arm never losing its firmness.

"Zach," I whispered, hoping he'd catch the pleading in my voice.

"Shut up! Shut the hell up," he all but yelled at me and I instinctively closed my eyes, terrified of what was going to

come now. Would he hit me? Did he hate me so much?

"You ruined everything," he growled, running his free hand through his hair.

I looked at him questioningly, tears stinging my eyes as I fought to hold it all together. I'd been dreading this moment, waiting for him to break and blame me for ruining his life. I wanted to tell him that this was as hard for me as it was for him but I doubt he cared. The alcohol in his system had taken away his rationality and there was nothing I could do to make him see sense.

"I couldn't be with that girl I brought home! I couldn't touch her without the guilt eating at me. You did this to me," he spat and I was left speechless.

He pushed himself off of me and struggled to walk straight; he was about to fall when I quickly ran and caught him, his weight crushing me. He muttered a few more incoherent things, things I knew were directed to hurt me. I tried my best to support his weight and struggled greatly to get him to my room, which was closest to where we were. I managed to get him on the bed, laying him down more roughly than I intended. I took off his shoes and placed a blanket on him.

I stared at the sleeping form of my husband and hard as I tried I couldn't find it in myself to be angry at him. He wasn't at fault; what he'd been subjected to was not what he'd earned. He hated me, I knew that and I was far from loving him but there was something I needed to do, something which would heal his heart.

4-Truth

Late on a Tuesday night, Zach walked into my room like nothing had happened. Had he forgotten how he'd ambushed me and how frightened I'd been? I guess he had since he'd made no attempt to apologize and I left him alone, not wanting any confrontation like before. I rarely left the house and staying inside so much was messing with my line of thought. Everything seemed muddled and confusing and I began to worry for my own sanity. My parents had made no attempt to contact me and I didn't think they'd come to see me anytime soon. They were ashamed of what they'd done to me and to be honest I didn't want to see them either. Any reminder of what my life used to be like was too painful and I'd rather do without it.

An envelope was thrown roughly onto my bed where I sat. I looked at Zach in all his drunken glory and wrinkled my nose because of the strong stench of alcohol coming from him. I carefully picked up the white envelope and opened it to find a ticket to Florida, with the flight leaving the next day. I looked at him, clearly confused because I hadn't had the slightest idea that we were leaving.

"Why are we leaving?" I asked him and my own voice sounded weird to me, not having used it much over the past few days.

"We need to get away from the city for a while. Dad thinks it'd be a good idea to visit our family's vacation home since not many people know about it," he replied in a curt tone and I nodded. It was only understandable that our families would want us to disappear for a while before

people started asking questions. They'd already fed them enough excuses for why we didn't attend dinners or why we'd skipped out on our own wedding reception. Florida would provide an opportunity for the hype surrounding the new high profile wedding to die down and then maybe we could return.

Zach was nearly on his way back when he suddenly stopped, bending down to pick something up. I scooted over to the edge of my bed to find out what it was that had caught his attention. I started playing with my fingers nervously as he picked up the broken pieces of my phone. The screen had a crack through it and the back was dented heavily. I had made sure to render it completely useless so that I wouldn't be tempted to call *him* or return any of his phone calls. Luckily or rather unluckily, depending on how you see it, I could never remember phone numbers and without the help of my cell phone there was slim chance that I could ever contact Noah again. It was better that way.

He held the phone up, examining it and then looking at me for an explanation. I shrugged casually and said, "It fell." He pursed his lips at my response and for a moment it looked like he was actually tempted to ask more questions, like he actually cared but then something must have made him change his mind. He pocketed my phone and nodded. "I'll get you a new one. I'll take this so that they can take out the sim card." I was about to protest but then rationality caught the better of me. I didn't need to give him a reason to get curious, not that he ever would. He exited my room and again left me in silence. I switched on the TV and tuned into the news. Laying my head down on my pillow, I let the voices of the reporters become background noise and closed my eyes. It was a technique that helped; as the reporters spoke, I conjured up images in

response to their words. This kept certain images from flashing across my eyes till I went to sleep.

The next day, the butler and the rest of the help hovered over me, helping me pack. I had no idea what to do since my mom had always done my packing if we ever left for an extended period of time. I let Mrs. Hotch go through my stuff and decide what I was supposed to take. Zach had already packed and I was told that he was having breakfast in the dining room downstairs. I never joined him for any meal and preferred for it to be delivered to my room. This morning however I had a strong urge to just leave my room and go sit with him. Somehow I was hoping that leaving the city would mean that something between the two of us would change as well. I wasn't expecting us to fall in love, far from it, but maybe we could learn to get along more, just till we got the situation we were in figured out.

"Miss, Mr. Price is waiting for you downstairs," said a meek little voice and I saw a young girl, barely 16, looking at me with frightened eyes. I smiled warmly at her and nodded. It was time to go and I for one couldn't be out of this house sooner. Walking down, I saw that all of our luggage had already been loaded into the car and that Zach was tapping his foot impatiently, leaning against the door frame. I hurried downstairs, the sound of my heels gaining his attention. With a bored expression on his face, he signaled the driver to bring the car to the front of the house and left without acknowledging my presence. I glared at his retreating figure and stopped myself from stomping my foot. Who did he think he was? Could he not be bothered to even say a 'hello'?

"Did you pack everything you need?" he asked me once we were in the car and headed for the airport. I nodded and turned my face away from him.

"Are you sure?" he asked again. "I don't want to have to turn back all the way just because you forgot a pair of earrings or something." I rolled my eyes and before I could stop myself uttered the words, "I'm not Olivia." I bit my lip as soon as I'd said that and watched my husband flinch and clench his fists. I wanted to apologize but somehow the words never left my mouth. I didn't feel like I owed him anything, not even an apology.

The rest of the journey passed in silence and soon we were at the airport, checking in. Zach was taking care of everything, treating me like a child who couldn't be trusted to handle such responsibility. I wanted to tell him that I'd travelled alone plenty of times but seeing my earlier slip-up, I kept my mouth shut and let him do what he wanted. After we'd checked in, we headed for the waiting area with Zach walking at least twenty steps in front of me. I rolled my eyes and trudged after him, focusing my eyes on the back of his head. I was concentrating so much on glaring at him that I didn't notice another person walking towards me. I only realized it when I barged right into the figure and her things fell to the ground, making a loud noise. Zach turned to see the cause of the commotion and groaned when he realized that I was involved in it. I bent down to help pick up the things the woman in front of me had dropped, muttering sorry constantly.

It was only when I was handing her some papers that I got a chance to see who she was. One look at her and I froze. I could hear my blood pounding and the heavy thudding of my heart. The woman had just turned 21 and was staring at me with her mouth wide open. Before either of us could get a word in, Zach came and stood beside me, looking as polite as ever.

"I'm so sorry for my wife's clumsiness, I hope nothing got broken," he said, pointing to the laptop she carried in her

arms. I had gotten it for her on her birthday, in her favourite colour red. The red of the laptop now matched the colour of her face as she glowered at me. He'd said wife, she must have picked that up. I had to explain things to her before she got furious and told him. I opened my mouth to speak, my eyes watering slightly but she beat me to the punch. Her hand made contact with my cheek and it stung where she hit me. The pain made my already watery eyes pour over with tears and I said in a shaky voice, "Lexie, please this isn't what it looks like."

"You bitch!" she spat and raised her hand as if to hit me again. I closed my eyes waiting for the pain but that's when Zach finally came back to his senses and stood in front of me protectively, catching her wrist just in time.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" he hissed at her, his eyes raging.

"I'm giving this cheating whore what she deserves," she replied, her tone acidic.

Zach looked from me to her and then back. He then stared at me, his arms crossed in front of his chest, his figure hiding Lexie behind it.

"Arianna what is going on?" he asked me, the anger and embarrassment obvious in his tone. Everyone in the area was staring at us and Zach's ears had turned red because of the show that we were putting on.

I gulped and looked down at my feet, wondering whether to lie or not. I guessed the truth would be better seeing how Lexie was right there.

"I used to date her brother," I said, each word feeling like it had echoed a million times.

5-Promise

Content/Trigger Warning: This chapter contains scenes of sexual assault.

With shaking hands I gripped the Styrofoam cup that Zach handed me. My entire body was trembling and I knew I was close to hyperventilation. I looked up gratefully at the tall figure looming in front of me and gulped the lukewarm water hungrily. We were sitting in the waiting lounge now, awaiting the announcement of our flight but boarding that plane was the last thing on either of our minds. Lexie, being the drama queen she always was had exited after our dramatic confrontation and had left me to pick up the pieces. Though it wasn't what Zach was going to say or do that worried me, the only thing I could think about was how Lexie was going to explain this to Noah. I would've told him eventually, but finding out the way he was going to was the last way I'd have wanted. I didn't even want to imagine the look on his face when he finds out; I wasn't scared for myself, all I wanted was to shield him from the pain of knowing.

Zach sat down next to me, moving rather awkwardly to create enough space between us. Neither of us spoke but I could tell from his body language that there were a million things running through his head. If it'd been someone else I'd just have asked them to spit it out but with Zach I felt as if I had to maintain a certain decorum and that I could never step out of line. I'd always seen him as the guy who'd marry my elder sister and I'd never gotten rid of the shyness and awkwardness that I felt around him.

"You were with someone when we... got married?" he asked, his voice so low that it almost felt like I'd imagined the question.

I nodded slightly and gulped, trying to get rid of the choking feeling in my throat. Here it was, the time to tell him everything. I wondered if that would change his behavior towards me. If he found out that he wasn't the only one to lose a person they'd love then maybe he'd make an attempt to make things better between us.

"Does he know that you...?"

I shook my head. "I haven't told him, I couldn't bring myself to do it," I said in a small voice, hating having to admit what I'd done.

"Is that why you broke your phone? You weren't planning on ever telling, were you?" he asked as understanding dawned upon him and I groaned. Why did he want to find out all about me all of a sudden? I was beginning to think it was better when he treated me like I didn't exist.

"Arianna..." Zach groaned, gripping his forehead, "you don't do that to people," he said and let his head fall to his knees. I knew what he meant; by not telling Noah about what had happened I'd acted like a huge coward but it was a better alternative than breaking the heart of the guy who loved me the most.

"I'm sorry I didn't know that there was a proper way to let your boyfriend know that you married someone else," I said, my tone curter than I wanted it to be.

The Zach I knew would've reprimanded me, given me an equally bitter answer but somehow he remained quiet and I was grateful for that. My head wasn't in the right place and I didn't want to say or do something that I'd regret later.

Things were bad enough with Zack as it was and I didn't want to do anything to further deteriorate that.

"Did you love him?" he asked me after a while and I decided it was no use hiding it.

"More than you can imagine." I let out a bitter laugh but something bugged me. He'd asked me *did you love him*, it was like he was referring to the past. I still loved Noah, I would always love him and I was sure that my feelings for him would never change.

Next to me, Zach sighed and at the same time an announcement was made, signaling that the plane was ready for boarding. I quickly grabbed all my stuff and headed to join the line that was already starting to form. I couldn't believe the conversation that we'd been having. I was discussing my love life with the guy I was married to; that couldn't be normal could it?

A guy separated me and Zach in the line and the distance was calming. I took out my documents, my hands fumbling with all the various pieces of paper until they all fell on the ground. The guy behind me picked them up before I could even get down to do it myself and as he handed them to me, he squeezed my hand and gave me a toothy grin. Immediately I pulled back from him; the look in his eyes and the smell of his breath told me that he was drunk.

"What, a guy don't even get a thank you?" he slurred and I retreated farther away from him till I barged into the woman standing in front of me. She turned around and glared at me, muttering *bitch*. Great, now I was stuck between a drunk and a real-life version of Regina George. The guy didn't take my moving away from him as a sign that he creeped me out, instead he moved closer to me and whispered in my ear, a chill running down my spine as he spoke.

"You know you look mighty fine and that ass..." He sucked in a breath as his hands trailed lower down my back. I whimpered at the lust in his voice, his touch making me feel disgusted with myself and dirty. I closed my eyes, praying that he'd leave me alone.

A loud bang made me open my eyes and I turned to see Zach throwing a punch at the drunken man who ended up lying on the floor with a loud thud with blood oozing from his nose. Zach towered over him, his foot resting on the man's stomach, crushing it under his weight. My eyes widened as I took in the scene before me.

"You touch her one more time and you'll be begging me to kill you," Zach growled at him and the man on the floor nodded his head furiously, looking scared out of his wits; he sobered up pretty quickly, I thought to myself. I rushed to Zach's side and he immediately directed his attention to me. "Are you okay?" he asked and I nodded, not looking at his face but his bruised knuckles. Security had arrived by then and were picking up the man from the floor roughly. None of them asked Zach any questions; even they knew who he was, who we were, and that granted some benefits.

I gingerly took hold of Zach's hand, trailing my fingers over the bruises. "You didn't need to do that," I whispered, afraid to look into his eyes which I knew for a fact were focused on me. He pulled his hand away from mine and walked back to the line; this time I stood next to him. I would have clung to his arm had it not been such an inappropriate idea.

"I might not be the love of your life Arianna but it's still my job to protect you whether you like it or not."

Was it wrong to say that hearing him say those words made me feel, for the first time in what felt like a long time, like I would be safe and that nothing could harm me, not if

he was there? But then what if he became the person who would harm me? Could Zach really protect me from himself and the nature of our relationship?

6-Confrontation

The cottage was ideal for two people who wanted to hide from the rest of the world and I fell in love with it immediately. Olivia had gone on and on about the Price's vacation home but nothing she'd said had done it justice. It looked like something right out of a Disney fairytale with its wooden floors and walls. The structure itself was made of terracotta and the sloping roof was painted a homely red colour. The garden was full of orange blossoms and lavender, and keeping with the lavish Price tradition, a Koi pond. There was a hammock in the garden too and that was where I spent most of my time, soaking up the sun. Zach, on the other hand, spent hours and hours at their private beach, swimming and surfing. He was one for water sports, that much I had figured out.

I was glad to get away from the hustle and bustle of the city, especially after what had happened at the airport. I needed some time to think and plan my next move. I'd realized that Noah deserved to know the truth and not Lexie's distorted version of it. I would tell him myself, even if that meant him hating me for the rest of my life. Zach realized that I had some decisions to make and left me to my own self; I only saw him during meals when he would cook for the both of us. Turns out Zach was a better cook than all the chefs my mother had hired and his food soon became a drug to me. He'd cook the most delicious meals, pot roast being his specialty and I'd lick the plate clean. It was during these moments that he'd crack a smile and his eyes would light up. It was the first time I'd seen him smile since we'd gotten married.

It was about the tenth day of our 'vacation' that I decided to go to the beach. I hadn't been there yet mostly because I considered it to be Zach's place; somewhere he could go to clear his head, just like me and the hammock. That day however he said that he needed to go out of town for some business meeting and I had the entire place to myself. I quickly slipped into my bikini, thanking my lucky stars that the weather was still warm enough to swim. I put on a light cotton dress over it and grabbed my sunglasses. I ran to the beach, excited by the prospect of being alone in the endless water and letting go of all the rigidity that had crept through me since the wedding. I was eighteen years old but I'd started to act much older; I'd become an echo of my old fun-loving self in less than a month and I wasn't okay with that. Yes, I'd suffered a huge setback; yes, my life had changed forever and not in a way that I would have wanted but all of that had to leave my mind today. Today I was going to be the old Ari Bell and nothing could come in my way.

I literally skipped to the beach, not knowing the reason behind my rather surprisingly good mood and quickly took off my dress. I stepped closer to the water, tiptoeing to check the temperature and I was relieved to find out that it was warm enough. I walked in slowly till the water came up to mid-thigh and enjoyed the feel of the cool water on my body. I loved to swim and almost started to feel like the old me as I fooled around. After a while, I lowered my body and dipped my head under the water, holding my breath.

Under the water, I found calm, quiet and serenity. The only problem was, whenever I closed my eyes only one image flashed behind my eyelids: Noah's smile, Noah's eyes, Noah's touch and each and every single memory I had with him. If it was possible to cry underwater then I'm sure a few tears had managed to escape. I propelled myself

above the water and came out gasping for breath; thinking about my ex-boyfriend might not have been such a good idea, especially underwater. Gone was my good mood as a foreboding feeling came over me. What was I doing? How could I even begin to have a good time when my life was going towards a downward spiral? I was in a loveless marriage, forced upon a good, decent man. The boy who loved me more than life itself was going to get his heart broken soon and no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't think of a way to get out of the twisted puzzle my life had become.

I swam slowly to the shore, concentrating on the line of each stroke to divert my attention from the not-so-pleasant thoughts that were running through my head. The sand stuck to my wet feet, the grains feeling rough as they grazed my skin. I picked up my towel and dried myself. What would the old Ari do in such a situation? I asked myself and there was only one answer. In the past when things got really bad, I'd always turn to one person and I couldn't do that anymore. Olivia wasn't here; she'd bailed on all of us, even her fiancé. I'd never have guessed that she wasn't in love with him; if she didn't want to marry him then she would've at least told me. Something had felt off about her actions but I was never given a chance to wonder, I was simply thrust headfirst into a life I never asked for.

I spread a blanket on the sand and laid down on it, not bothering to put my dress on. My skin needed all the vitamin D it could get from all the time I'd spent locked up in the Price mansion. The sunrays tingled my face and I closed my eyes, cherishing the feel of them. Soon I began to feel drowsy and didn't fight the sleep when it came. I gladly let sleep overcome me and didn't fight when it sucked me into unconsciousness.

When I woke up, my head felt groggy and heavy but I quickly realized that it was nighttime and that someone had covered me up with another blanket. It took me a few seconds to adjust to the dark but as soon as I did, I also realized that it was cold outside and that my flimsy dress over my slightly damp bikini did nothing to shield me from the cold. I pulled the blanket tightly around myself, knowing exactly who'd put it on me and feeling touched by the gesture. I wandered into the house to find a mouth-watering smell coming from the kitchen. I followed my senses to find Zach bent over the stuff, busy concocting yet another masterpiece. I was transfixed by how he moved; the usually calculative Zach Price let himself loose when it came to cooking and was a sight to watch. He moved with precision but there was a different kind of energy about him; he was freer and involved, it was all very hands-on and despite the fact that I felt like a creeper watching him like that, I stood.

He turned and was startled to find me standing there, his eyes widening as he took in my appearance. The blanket only covered so much; my legs were still visible and you could catch a tiny glimpse of the tattoo I had slightly above my knee. My hair, damp from before, now hung in loose untended curls around my face. If anything, I looked like a disheveled homeless person. I consciously moved my hand to my hair, uselessly trying to fix it but that only seemed to make Zach look at me even more strangely. What was up with that?

"You're awake..." he stated rather awkwardly, returning to the stove and avoiding looking at me. I pushed myself off the wall against which I was leaning and followed Zach, standing beside him as he put various spices in the stew he was making. The smell wafted up my nose and my stomach

grumbled. I blushed, realizing that Zach probably heard the sound too.

He chuckled; yes, the Zach Price chuckled and it stunned me. Was there something in the water here? Why were we acting so different than the way we used to?

“Dinner’s going to be ready soon. Why don’t you go, umm, change and I’ll set the table.” He said all of this without ever looking up from the pot and it was strange for a guy who always looked people right in the eyes.

“Okay I’ll be right back,” I said, feeling my words hang in the air.

I quickly changed into a pair of jeans and a light pink v-neck sweater, brushing my hair to make it less tangled and letting it fall freely over my shoulders. I noticed a rosy tinge on my cheeks, something which had been missing for weeks. The sun here definitely agreed with me or was it something else? Was it excitement, anticipation? I had no idea what was going on with me and I didn’t want to find out either.

Zach had set everything up by the time I got back and was patiently waiting for me. This was new, usually he didn’t wait up for me; he’d cook, eat and then go to sleep in a separate bedroom. He’d been acting really different today and it irked me not knowing why. I settled into my seat and spooned some of the hot stew into my bowl. I sat in the chair in front of Zach around the small table for four.

“This is delicious,” I said, repeating my words from every meal and on cue he replied with a curt thanks.

We ate in silence for a while and I was about to take the dirty dishes to the sink when Zach stopped me, looking rather hesitant about saying something.

"Can we talk?" he asked and I nodded, feeling concerned. What was this about?

"We'll need to go back soon and when we do I want you to go tell your boyfriend about what happened. Please, it's the least you and I can do for him." I felt stunned, why was he bringing up Noah again? I didn't like it when he talked about him, much less pitied him. I decided to keep my mouth shut, fearing I'd say something inappropriate.

"I've been thinking, just because we were made to sign some papers and say a few words doesn't mean that we necessarily have to be in a married relationship," he said after a while and that got my attention.

"What are you trying to say?" I asked, my words coming out rather strained.

"I want you to continue your relationship with Noah, irrespective of the nature of our relationship," he said quickly and again avoiding eye contact.

My heartbeat sped up, he couldn't possibly mean... No, what he was implying was sick and wrong and immoral and no one in their right mind would suggest that. I was speechless, the right words never coming to mind.

"Arianna? Say something," he said softly and I stared blankly at him.

"You're saying... you want me to... You want me to be with Noah again?" I asked, as if him repeating the words would make more sense of it all.

"In simpler terms, yes, that's what I want," he said in a matter-of-fact tone. He had clearly thought about this but I couldn't wrap my head around the idea. My husband, the man I was married to, wanted me to be with my boyfriend, or rather ex-boyfriend, again?

"I'm sorry... I need to go," I said as I stood up, dropping my spoon on the floor with a loud crash. I ran away from Zach as fast as my legs could carry me back to my room. I locked the door behind me knowing that he was running after me. I leant against the closed door, hyperventilating as he knocked repeatedly on the door. I sank to the floor, my head in my hands waiting for the knocking to stop.

"Arianna let me in! What's wrong?" he shouted and I ignored him.

"Stop acting like a child and open the door," he said, sounding very annoyed and that's when it hit me. To Zach I'd always be a child, his fiancé's kid sister who was immature, someone he'd always look down upon. That was probably why he felt like he could make all these life-changing decisions about me without even asking. Well if he treated me like a child, then a child was exactly what he would get. I picked myself up from the floor, grabbed my iPod and played my favourite rock song, turning up the sound as high as it would go.

Take that, Zach.

7-Surprise

Content/Trigger Warning: This chapter mentions suicide.

I avoided Zach for the better part of the trip and while I attempted to ignore him, he made efforts for reconciliation. He would make the most delicious breakfast every morning and leave it outside my bedroom door. When I would eventually come down, he'd attempt to strike up rather uneasy conversations. He stopped going out of town and volunteered to take me sightseeing but I had made up my mind to ignore him. He had to realize the immensity of the mistake he had made. He had likened me to a tradable object; passed from one man to another once they're done. I had been traded to him in place of my family's honour and now he'd trade me to Noah to relieve his guilty conscience.

On the last day of the trip, I yet again spent the majority of my time in my room, packing, wandering about and staying restless. I wasn't sure which was worse, staying here in the rather awkward limbo we were in or going back to New York to the Price Mansion which held the most horrid memories for me. I could've sworn a couple of weeks back that the place would drive me insane but now I had this strange sense of longing for the absurd normalcy it brought. I would go back to being confined to the dreary room and Zach would go back to being oblivious of my existence; we would work in perfect harmony. As I shut the suitcase, I realized that I had made up my mind. New York it was.

"Would you like me to carry that bag for you?" Zach asked, pointing to a particularly heavy bag slung across my

shoulders. I knew that my muscles would ache from the force I was exerting on them by carrying it but my pride didn't allow me to relinquish it. Zach needed to find another damsel to carry around. I ignored him and kept walking towards the departure lounge. I heard him sigh behind me and I felt nothing. He could do whatever he wanted, I didn't care anymore.

The plane ride was slow and torturous. Despite my efforts to change my seat, I was still stuck with a husband who didn't know when to shut up.

"Do you want me to order something for you from the catalogue?"

"How do you like your fish, it's nicely seasoned isn't it?"

"I hate crying babies. Why do the airlines even allow people to bring infants onboard?"

He went on and on and on and I resisted the urge to smack my head against the small plane window or to simply jump out of it. The only thought which kept me from more suicidal pondering was knowing that I'd get to eat our cook's killer pot roast when we got back. I hated to admit that I had never eaten something that tasted half as good.

When the flight ended, I couldn't have moved any faster. I got up to grab my hand luggage from the overhead cabin but a hand reached it before I could. The Rolex on his wrist was a telltale sign of who the person was.

"I got it!" I huffed as I tried to push Zach out of my way but he had the upper hand, being taller, stronger and less prone to childish antics. He easily moved me out of his way and grabbed all my bags, leaving me with just my purse. He lifted them easily, as if they didn't weigh a ton and maneuvered us outside to baggage claim. I walked behind him, glaring constantly and I swear I heard him chuckle.

We collected the rest of our stuff in silence and went outside to look for the limo that automatically stood out. I cringed as we walked, the events that had played out when I was last here immediately making me panic. Had Lexie told him? How would he react? How was he going to deal with all this?

"Earth to Arianna, hello?" I blinked as Zach waved his hand in front of me, looking annoyed. I shook my head slightly to get rid of Noah's heartbreaking face from my mind and focused my attention on Zach.

"What?" I snapped at him and he pinched the bridge of his nose, exhaling heavily.

"I asked you if it was okay if we made a stop on the way to the house?" he asked and I looked at him confused. Where would he want to go at this time of the night? It was nearly eleven.

"Is it important?" I whined as we settled into the car, the heat from the car heater immediately warming me up.

"It sort of is, I wouldn't be asking you if it wasn't," he stated in a matter-of-fact voice. Great, we'd been in New York barely ten minutes and he was back to his snarky self. Typical boy.

"Fine then, do whatever you want," I said quietly, leaning my head against the seat and closing my eyes. I needed sleep.

Zach poked me gently as the car came to a halt and after pretending to be deep in sleep, I opened my eyes. Truth was that I couldn't go to sleep near him; I'd never allow myself to be that vulnerable. The driver opened my door and I got out, the cold assaulting my senses. I shivered and my teeth started chattering; I shoved my hands in my

pockets and moved closer to the car in hopes of getting some warmth.

“Where are we?” I asked Zach in a shaky voice as he came around the other side to stand next to me.

“We’re here to see someone,” he said simply as he began walking up the street to a rather tattered-looking apartment building.

“Someone who?” I relented, walking behind him as fast as I could possibly manage. He could possibly kill me due to hypothermia and he’d decided now to be cryptic.

As he stopped in front of the door, he took a deep breath and focused his blue eyes on me. There was an unreadable emotion in them, almost like he was afraid of telling me what he knew. If they weren’t already there due to the cold, I knew I’d get goosebumps.

“Someone who could possibly tell us where your sister is.”

8-Comfort

I felt the heat escape my body; it was like my veins contained ice rather than blood. My heart started pounding inside my chest and my knees began to tremble. I must have heard him wrong, maybe he'd said something totally unrelated. I gulped as I willed myself to ask him to repeat himself.

"Come again?"

In a voice softer than I could have ever imagined coming from him, Zach spoke the words I just realized I never wanted to hear.

"We're going to meet someone who might know where Olivia is." He looked at me to gauge my reaction and I had no idea what expression my face carried at the moment. Was I happy, relieved, scared or angry? Did I want to see the woman who had ruined so many lives and however unintentionally had destroyed mine the most? Why was Zach doing this? He had lost as much as I had but did he still love her? My heart ached at how selfish I was being. How could I think about myself when this man in front of me deserved to get all the answers that he wanted? My sister had broken his heart, she'd broken and crushed his soul and robbed him of the desire to love, and the least he deserved was to hear from her own mouth why she did that to him.

"How... how do you know this?" I asked quietly as I stood in front of the door.

"This man called me a few days ago; he said he had some information for me and that if I didn't come see him he'd go

to the press with it," he said all of this like it wasn't a big deal, like things like this happened on a regular basis. His voice had become cold again, detached, and I didn't like it one bit.

Zach rang the bell before I could say or ask anything. Almost immediately my hand reached for his, a way of my body telling me that I wasn't ready for this. He gazed at my hand, tightly clasping his and he must've understood my state of mind since he didn't let go. Our breaths came out in puffs of smoke as we stood there, waiting for someone to let us in. I was trembling from head to foot, my flimsy sweater no match for the freezing cold of New York. Zach pulled off his jacket and wrapped it around my shoulders. I looked at him gratefully but couldn't hold his gaze for long. The strong emotion in them was starting to scare me.

We got buzzed in and entered the building hand in hand. The walls were yellowing with paint peeling off all over. Water seeped onto the floor from the cracks and there was a rancid smell about the place. A metal stairway led to the upper floor and it creaked beneath our feet as Zach led me to it. Honestly I never wanted the staircase to end; if it ended I'd have to face the truth, and that I didn't want to have to do. I was eighteen years old but I'd gone through more than any normal eighteen-year-old could ever imagine going through and it seemed like the problems never ended. I'd gotten used to my life but it was like someone was constantly reminding me that I'd never find peace in the life I'd been forced to choose.

We walked down a dingy corridor with a stained carpet lining the floor. The occasional drunkard stumbled out from the rooms and I found myself pressed firmly against Zach's side. His protectiveness had obviously heightened since the incident at the airport and for the first time I was glad I had someone to save me. I never allowed Noah to fight my

battles for me; I wasn't a damsel in distress and I didn't need someone to be my hero but I was grateful for Zach's presence.

We came to a halt outside a room labeled 405. Loud music vibrated through the doors and reverberated in my chest. By now a knot of tension had formed in my stomach and was constantly making my fists clench in pain. What if Olivia was inside...?

Zach knocked firmly on the door and we waited with bated breath. I dared not look at him and he was avoiding looking directly at me. I knew my nails were digging into his palms but I couldn't let go of his hand. It just wasn't possible for me in the moment.

The door opened slightly and a foot popped out the small creak that opened up. The foot led to a leg covered by ripped jeans. I followed the trail to find a somewhat familiar face grinning at us.

Nick. I took one look at his face and my heart stopped. She couldn't have, she couldn't possibly have done this.

"Are you alright little Ari, you look like you've just seen a ghost," he said in a snarky voice and the hair at the back of neck stood up. I had never liked him, not since I'd caught him and my sister in her room and now this guy could potentially break Zach more than the damage my sister had already done. I was scared for him, I wanted to protect him but I knew it was too late. Had I known it was Nick we were coming to meet, I'd never have let him enter the building in the first place.

"You know him?" Zach focused his attention on me and gripped my hand more tightly.

"Unfortunately yes, he was my piano teacher," I said, glaring at the man clad in a leather jacket.

"You always were my favourite student but it was always your sister who interested me," he sneered and I felt my lunch coming back up.

"You talk only to me, do you understand that? Stay away from her!" Zack growled and pushed me behind him. I clung to his shirt and resisted the urge to bury my head in the crook of his neck. What had my sister done?

Nick waltzed into his apartment and we followed. Immediately my throat started burning due to the strong stench of alcohol. The place screamed of Nick, it was dirty and disgusting. Leftover pizza boxes, dozens of beer bottles, official letters strewn all over the place with an inch of dust covering everything. His place truly reflected the kind of man he was.

"Did you bring the money?" Nick asked Zach as he made himself comfortable on his own couch.

Next to me, I felt Zach's entire body turn rigid and his free hand curled up into a fist. I knew he wouldn't lose control though, that wasn't who he was.

"Yes I did but I need you to tell me what you know first," he answered him in an icy tone.

"What do you want to know first, rich boy? How about I tell how your fiancé came running to me on her wedding day, begging me to take her away. Or I could tell you how she had me sell her engagement ring to get tickets for the both of us to leave the city."

The tension in the room was palatable, the silence so deafening that it could drive a normal person insane. Blood rushed to my head, making it pound hard. Was he telling the truth? My mind refused to believe him but my heart told me that he was right. Things that I'd overlooked in the past now came rushing back to mind. Olivia had started

acting strangely on the days before the wedding and I'd just attributed it to nerves. Never could I have imagined that she'd let her crush on my music teacher ruin her life.

"Stop it Nick! Just tell him what he needs to know!" I screamed at him, finally finding my voice. I knew I had to protect Zach as much as I could.

"Not until I get my money sweetheart," he replied, making my skin crawl.

I looked over to Zach and the picture of his face broke my heart all over again. His face had lost its entire colour and his head was bowed in defeat. His eyes were dead, stone cold and far off. A vein pulsed in his neck and his hand held mine in a death grip.

"Zach, give him his money, he'll tell us where she is and we can get the hell out of here," I said quickly, looking at him and making sure he was still listening to me.

Zach took out a check from a pocket in his jeans and threw it towards Nick who grabbed it greedily.

"Keep it; I don't need to know anything else," he said in a voice lacking any emotion and hurried out of there, leaving me behind with an overjoyed looking Nick who couldn't take his eyes off the check.

"Did she even remotely regret doing what she did?" I asked him quietly.

"No Ari, honestly she didn't. She was just glad to be rid of you all," he replied and for once a look of pity crossed his features and I was reminded of the music teacher who'd made me love music so much.

Without saying another word I left him behind in his apartment, my heart sinking with every step I took towards

Zach. I had no idea how I was going to handle this but I had to be strong enough for the both of us.

I found him collapsed against the railing of the staircase with his head in his hands. I sat down next to him and rested my hand on his shoulder. I felt him tense under my touch but he didn't shrug my hand away.

"She's not worth the pain Zach," I said softly and I heard his breathing quicken next to mine.

"She never loved me did she?" he choked out in a broken voice and it felt like my heart was being weighed down by an anchor the size of the Titanic.

"I'm sure she did, Zach. She just got scared and ran but that doesn't mean she didn't love you."

"You didn't run Arianna; you didn't leave me that day," he said and looked up, his eyes burning into mine.

"I... I..." I was lost in the power of his eyes holding mine as if life itself depended on them.

He moved his face near mine, inching his lips closer and closer to mine and for the tenth time tonight my heart began wildly crashing inside my chest. Instinctively I closed my eyes and allowed myself to succumb to my senses. I breathed in the smell of his cologne and welcomed the heat from his body.

"Open your eyes Ari," he whispered and I felt his breath fan my face.

I followed his instruction and opened my eyes to see his face only a hair's width away from mine. What was he waiting for? I almost wanted to grab his shirt and close the gap between us.

His lips travelled to my ear and I shuddered at the contact.

He gently trailed his lips down my neck. I arched my body towards him as a moan left my lips.

Zach pulled back and put some space between us. The lack of contact was like an attack of cold water over my senses and my brain finally kicked in. What the hell was I doing?

Zach got up and held out his hand to me. I got up on my own and stood at an awkward distance from him. He sighed as he neared me and took my hands in his.

"I'm sorry I brought you here, I guess I knew I'd need the support," he said softly and brought our hands level with our faces.

"It's okay, I'm glad you made me come. I'm glad that I could be there for you," I replied shyly and god knows what possessed me to do what I did next. I freed my hands from his and wrapped them tightly around his waist. For a moment Zach's body reflected his surprise over my actions but that quickly gave way to his emotions. He buried his head in my shoulder and brought his arms around me.

At that moment I didn't feel lost. At that moment, I thought I'd found a home.

9-Settling

It was easier to convince myself that what had happened with Zach was purely accidental. We'd gotten caught up in our emotions and that had made us act the way we did. On the drive back home, that is what I repeatedly convinced myself of. It was all due to the circumstances we were in and nothing more. I couldn't allow myself to even think about any other reason to explain why I had acted the way I did. I didn't understand why I had felt the urgent need to be held by him, to have his arms around me, holding me tight. Those lips... I shook the thought out of my mind as the gates opened to the vast estate of the Price Mansion. A chill washed over me; this place represented a point in my life where I had honestly felt that nothing would be right ever again, and now returning to it, the feeling too came back with a vengeance.

A hand on my arm made me jump and with a pounding heart, I turned to see Zach looking at me worriedly. Concern was written across his features and I felt horrible for being so thoughtless. He'd just gotten what possibly could be the most heartbreaking news of his life and here I was lost in my own world.

"Are you okay?" he asked softly and I nodded, giving him a weak smile.

"Just a little tired. I'll be fine once I get some sleep."

Silence surrounded us once again as the car finally stopped outside the house. The numerous members of the help quickly surrounded the car. Like a well-oiled machine they quickly began taking out the luggage and carrying it to the house. Zach got out and opened my door for me, the

civility between us clearly surprising the people who'd watched us ignore one another the past few weeks. A roaring fire was lit in the fireplace as we entered the house; it was a welcome sight for sure. I hadn't realized it before but my body had literally frozen, not only because of the cold but also because of the encounter back at Nick's.

I winced as soon as I thought of the name. I didn't want to remember any of it, at least not tonight. My head was starting to hurt from all the drama that had unfolded. I'd think about it tomorrow and then maybe I wouldn't hate my sister so much.

Zach didn't join me by the fire and I couldn't blame him. If I were in his place, I would want to be alone too. As I heard the sound of his door shutting close, I sat down on the carpeted floor, leaning against the couch, and closed my eyes, feeling myself succumbing to the warmth as a comfort settled over my body. Before I knew it I was pulled into the dreamy unconsciousness of a well-deserved and peaceful sleep.

There was light, blinding white light on my face as I turned away from it. I tried to move but it felt like my body was trapped by a huge weight over my legs and halfway up my torso. I groaned as I tried to push off whatever was on me, probably a warm blanket or something. What I didn't expect to hear was someone groaning just as loudly as I had, only the person didn't sound as girly as I had. My eyes flew open as I let out a low shriek. I wasn't on the couch where I had fallen asleep; instead I was in a bed. A really warm, comfortable and large bed which I knew wasn't mine. The room I was in had walls coloured maroon and a warm, rich mahogany brown. My eyes struggled for a while to come to terms with the brightness coming from the wall-sized window where the curtains had been pulled to a side.

After they'd become accustomed to the light, I forcefully brought my eyes to the figure lying next to me on the bed.

My heart crashed loudly in my chest as I took in Zach's sleeping form, his chest rising heavily as he breathed. An adorable frown was on his face and his hair fell messily onto his forehead. The blanket only covered him from the waist down so I was able to see his toned muscles in the wife-beater he had on. My mouth hung slightly open at the sight of his arms, the tanned golden skin contrasting with the subtly bulging veins. I barely stopped myself from running my hands all over him, realizing instead the position we were in. His arm was draped around me and our legs were tangled; he leant against me heavily and I blushed at the proximity. I also realized that he'd taken off my coat and the sweater I had on so that I was just in a thin and figure-clinging t-shirt. I tried to move his arm so that I could get out but his hold only tightened around me protectively.

I guessed I'd just have to wake him up since there was no way I was going to lay with him in bed waiting for him to wake up.

"Zach," I said softly, nudging him but it didn't work. I moved closer to his ear and once again repeated his name.

"Livy," he muttered sleepily, a smile lighting up his face and he opened his eyes to find me staring at him with widened eyes.

He sure was surprised since he tried to get away from me as fast as he could but the tangled legs and the even more tangled mess of sheets between us didn't help. He brought his arms around me as we fell with a loud thud on the floor, my body crashing onto Zach's as he landed with a loud oomph on the cold tiled floor.

Zach blinked once, twice, thrice before understanding dawned upon him.

"Arianna, what are you doing here?" he asked and I frowned. I was pretty sure he had a perfectly good answer to his own question.

"That is exactly what I would like to know, how did I get in here?" I raised an eyebrow, ignoring how amazing it felt to have the heat from his body seep into mine.

"Would you mind getting off of me first?" he replied shakily as his eyes bore into mine.

Feeling rather stupid, I lifted myself off of him and pulled the hem of my shirt down firmly. It had ridden up as I slept and I didn't like the way Zach was looking at me because of it. Scratch that, I didn't like the way I felt because of how Zach was looking at me. It was wrong and having such feelings should be criminal.

I put some distance between us and sat down on the bed.

"How did I end up in your room?" I asked as I played nervously with my fingers.

He sighed as he too stood up and stretched his stiff body. I tried not to ogle at his rippling muscles and directed my gaze obstinately towards the floor. Why did he have such a hot body?

"I don't remember but I think I saw you sleeping on the couch and I was too tired to carry you all the way up to your room."

"You could've slept on the futon you know." I pointed at the comfiest looking piece of furniture in his room.

"And hurt my back? No, I don't think so, besides it's my room, I can sleep wherever I want to," he said curtly, going

through his closet to pick a shirt.

"So why didn't you put me on the futon?" I asked, biting my lip. I didn't know why I was asking all these questions but I did want to know what he was thinking.

Zach was silent for a while, as if deciding whether to answer that honestly or not. He avoided looking at me the entire time so I couldn't read the emotion behind his words.

"That would've sort of defeated the purpose of picking you up from a couch in the first place. Why are you making such a big deal out of this Ari?" He said that all way too quickly and I had a hard time believing that he was telling the truth. However it was the second time he had called me Ari and that made me smile inwardly, remembering the last time he'd done it. Then he had sounded like he cared; now however he sounded like he was just plain annoyed.

"Sorry, I didn't want to spoil your mood so early in the morning," I said dryly as I got off the bed, intending to head back to my room for a nice long shower. I hoped that that would help prevent me from having such inappropriate thoughts about someone who obviously still thought of me as a child.

"Hey come on, I didn't mean it like that," Zach said, following me quickly and grabbed my wrist, spinning me around.

His eyes studied my face and his fingers went up to my chin, forcing me to look at him.

"That didn't come out right. I'm sorry," he said softly and I nodded stupidly. Whenever he was like this, I found it easier to lose myself in his eyes. The colour was so magical, so enchanting that it was hard to not get transfixed by them.

"It's okay; I shouldn't have bugged you so early in the morning," I said shyly, mentally cursing myself for giving in to him so easily. I noted how he still had a firm hold on my wrist and neither of us made an attempt to change that.

"Did you really use the word bugged?" he asked, clearly amused. I scoffed, did he have to ruin the moment?

I began to turn away from him once again but he got to the door before I could.

"Let's go out and get breakfast," he said excitedly and this time my mouth nearly fell to the ground.

"Like out, out? As in out of this house?"

He rolled his eyes at my shock and ruffled my hair.

"We're not exactly prisoners here are we?" he asked and I grinned at him. Yes! We finally got to do normal stuff together; a grin spread across my face at the idea.

"Okay I'll go get dressed, give me twenty minutes," I chirped and ran out of the room.

He was making an effort. He was finally making an effort and that was enough for me; it even made me forget how the first thought that had rushed to his head that morning was my sister's name.

10-Discovery

I took a quick shower before rushing to the closet. I had to find the perfect dress but somehow none of the designer clothes in my closet seemed appropriate. I realized that I was too excited for this to be normal but that analysis could wait for now. I went through dress after dress until finally settling for a lilac sleeveless dress. It was cinched at the waist and launched into a poofy skirt which came just above my knees. It had a sweetheart neckline so allowed me to wear my favourite necklace. I slipped on some strappy heels and ran a brush through my hair. I didn't want to overdo it so after running a hand through my hair, I quickly applied some peach-flavoured lip gloss and mascara. I grabbed my bag and shawl from the bed and rushed downstairs.

Zach was on the phone when I got down but he quickly shut his phone off when he saw me. I smiled at him and blushed when I realized that he was checking me out. I averted my gaze and let him continue. It was the first time I'd made an attempt to dress nicely, otherwise around him I was always in jeans and baggy sweaters. He too for a change wasn't wearing a suit but casual jeans and a crisp blue shirt which went really well with his eyes. I tried not to stare but failed miserably. We stood in the middle of the living room awkwardly, waiting for someone to break the silence. The staff was watching us curiously as if waiting for one of us to throw a tantrum. I bet they were surprised when Zach said what he did.

"You look beautiful." He smiled and I knew the traitorous red tinge was beginning to colour my cheeks again.

I muttered a feeble thank you and allowed him to lead me outside. He told me to wait at the porch and I was surprised to not see the usual limo waiting for us. Instead, Zach jogged up to the side of the house and I heard the rev of an engine some moments later. My mouth fell open as he came into view, driving what could be nothing but a Lamborghini Murcielago. Oh wow.

He stopped the car in front of me and the car door lifted up. I gingerly took my seat, appreciating the interior. I'd never been a car person myself and had always preferred my bike to dad's expensive car collection but even I knew a beauty when I saw one.

"You like it?" Zach asked me, smirking slightly.

Right, of course I was making a total idiot of myself staring at his car like that. I needed to act more grown-up, more mature. Now how would a mature person respond to the question?

"The leather... it's very smooth," I said after a while and Zach laughed loudly as he drove out of the house.

Jerk, I thought to myself as I crossed my arms in front of me.

He kept laughing until we pulled up in front of a dainty looking café in Brooklyn. I immediately started panicking; I knew way too many people in this area to not experience another incident like the one at the airport. I opened my mouth to say something but Zach was already out of the car. He was coming to my side and my brain refused to think. Say something Ari! I thought to myself but I was coming up blank.

"Why did we come here Zach?" I asked him innocently as he led us to the café. I cautiously checked the area, knowing I was being paranoid.

"This place has the best coffee in the city, trust me."

I nodded as we entered the homely looking café with its baby blue walls and mouth-watering smell. I was surprised why I hadn't been to the place before since I had spent most of my time here with Noah. We were seated by a friendly lady whose hair had whitened completely. I allowed the smell of warm chocolate to soothe me as I finally stopped looking outside the windows for someone familiar.

We were just going through the menu when Zach's phone buzzed. It wouldn't stop ringing so he shot me an apologetic smile and left the café to receive the call. I signaled for him to leave and busied myself with going through the list of all the amazing breakfast options. I was absolutely starving.

I didn't hear the bell tinkle when the door to the café opened. I didn't hear a man approach the counter and in his baritone voice order a double chocolate mocha. I didn't hear his cup drop to the floor moments later but what I did hear was a voice say my name and that voice sent shocking fear all through my body.

"Ari," he breathed and I whipped my head around to convince myself that I was delusional.

I wasn't dreaming. He was standing there looking exactly as I'd left him. He wore a shirt a size too big for him; his jeans were faded not because they had been styled that way but because of the number of times they'd been washed. His brown messy hair somewhat obscured his blue-grey eyes. But it was in those very eyes that I noticed a change. They weren't light and shining as they once had been. His face looked tired and there were bags under his eyes. There was light stubble on his face, something he

detested. Right now his face was a mask of shock and I knew it mirrored my expression.

Noah. There he was, the love of my life standing a few feet from me and I couldn't just go and run into his arms. With shaking legs I got up and started walking towards him and he did the same. The café was room-sized so we were within a two-feet distance in a matter of minutes. Noah stood in front of me, looking like he'd seen a ghost. I drank in his face, a pang of longing alerting me how much I'd missed him.

"It's really you?" he whispered as he gently touched my face. I closed my eyes and relished his touch. Every inch his fingers travelled sent shockwaves of pleasure throughout my body. The tone of disbelief was so heartbreakingly full of love that I nearly broke down there and then.

I should've thought more, I should've weighed the pros and cons. I should've realized the consequences of my actions but I didn't. I threw my arms around him and buried my face in his chest. His arms automatically went around me, pulling me to him tightly as he lowered his face into my hair, breathing me in like he usually did.

I didn't know when the tears started coming out but before I knew it I was sobbing into his chest, crying like I had never cried before. They were tears of joy, of grief, of loss and of love. I cried as Noah ran his hands over my back soothingly.

"Shh Ari, everything's going to be okay. I'm here now," he said and I nodded, believing him. I didn't want to let him go, not ever. I was aware that people were watching us and my cheeks burned in embarrassment. Noah only had to look once before understanding what I was thinking. He led us outside, arms still wrapped around me and I still hadn't loosened my hold on him.

When the cold air hit my body I began to think more clearly. I lifted my head from Noah's chest and wiped away the tears that blurred my vision. I looked all around for the car that I knew would stand out in its surroundings. It wasn't here, he wasn't here.

My mind whirled as I started to comprehend the situation I was in. Had Zach planned this all along? Would that explain his absence? Had he set up Noah and me?

As much as I wanted to figure out my husband's actions I had a much more important issue to deal with. I looked at Noah who was looking at me worriedly; was it finally time to tell him the truth?

"Ari, do you want me to take you home?" he asked and I knew which home he meant. He'd never let me out of his sight until he knew what had happened a month ago.

"Yes," I sighed as he grabbed my hand and entwined our fingers. Zach wanted me to do this, I told myself; I'm doing nothing wrong, I repeated, this was necessary. But a voice at the back of my mind was saying something else entirely.

You want him to take you back, Ari.

There you go ladies and gentleman, Noah is in the house!
:D

So Team Zach or Team Noah? Oh and do you think Zach did this on purpose? :O

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